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CITATION:

NWOZOR, Agaptus. Power Rotation, Ethnic Politics and the Challenges of Democratization in Contemporary Nigeria. African Study Monographs 2014, 35(1): 1-18

ISSUE DATE:

2014-04

URL:

<https://doi.org/10.14989/187750>

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## POWER ROTATION, ETHNIC POLITICS AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines contemporary arguments and counter-arguments about zoning and power rotation, and the overall implications of these principles for the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. Because geopolitical zone structures roughly approximate to ethno-national groups, they play a central aggregating role in Nigeria's body politic. However, arguments about zoning and power rotation tend to undermine the geopolitical system and bolster the nation's North/South division. The death of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in 2010 opened a "Pandora's box" of intrigue within Nigeria's political elite. In the run-up to the 2011 Nigerian presidential election, logics of ethnicity, geopolitical zones, and geographic dichotomization were employed as justifications for claiming the presidency. Post-election riots and Nigeria's general lack of security are rooted in, and dictated by, the logic of this struggle for power. Delimiting the country in terms of North and South rather than geopolitical zones, depersonalizes and undermines ethno-national identities, which are important building blocks for the Nigerian Federation. It may also result in the creation of structural flaws that will drive and sustain political tension within the polity and pose a serious challenge to the consolidation of Nigeria's democratization.

**Key Words:** Power rotation; Democratization; Ethnic politics; Geopolitical zones; Political restructuring.

### INTRODUCTION

The leadership question in Nigeria has lingered unresolved for the last fifty-three years. This is as a result of four factors: the ascendancy and continued dominance of ethnicity as an aggregating tool, the retreat of Nigerian federalism, the perception of an exclusive right to leadership by the northern political elite, and the backlash of opposition from other ethnic groups (Ibeanu, 1999; Abubakar, 2004; Babawale, 2007). These factors have not only intensified the intractability of the leadership question but have also served as an incentive for antagonistic politicking.

In the run-up to the 2011 general elections, debates and controversy between residents of Nigeria's geopolitical zones about the trajectory of the presidential baton brought to the fore the centrifugal tendencies of elite interests. Popular interpretations of zoning and rotation by contending elite were not only flawed but also grossly misleading. While the elite dichotomization of the Nigerian state, either in terms of North and South or geopolitical zones, can be analytically useful, its relation to the 1999 Nigerian Constitution is arbitrary and, therefore, lacks legitimacy. These categorizations and differentiations were introduced into Nige-

ria's political discourse to anchor the principle of rotation. The intent of this principle is to ensure that all factions within the Nigerian state occupy the presidency in turn.

President Goodluck Jonathan's declaration of intention to contest the 2011 presidential election pitted regional elite against one another. The confusion and ambiguities attached to zoning and rotation fuelled and exacerbated ethno-regional claims and contentions. This confusion was powered by the crisis of personal ambitions, or what has been called 'generational anxiety'<sup>(1)</sup> (Samuel, 2007: 180).

The perception that President Jonathan's ambition was anti-unity and usurpative of the North's presidential turn was rooted in the premise that the rotation of power was for an eight-year term. This premise fuelled assertions that Jonathan's presidential ambition undermined zoning policy, and this threw the country into a Hobbesian state of mutual ethnic war (Ajaero, 2010). What the 1999 Nigerian Constitution guaranteed was one term of four years (Section 135 (2), Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Even the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) envisaged a single four-year term for its presidential candidates. According to Alli (2010), "The PDP in 1999 designed the zoning formula to give all the six geopolitical zones of the country a chance to have a shot at the presidency."<sup>(2)</sup> Each zone was expected to enjoy a four-year term in the presidency after which the race would be thrown open." The second four-year term is available only to an incumbent and is not automatic; it must be earned through a re-election.

This paper provides a deconstruction of arguments about the zoning and rotation of presidential powers in Nigeria, relying on informal interviews and secondary data. This is accomplished by reconstructing the analytical building blocks and constitutive elements of zoning and rotation, and their operational modalities within the generalized ambit of the PDP, and the 1999 Nigerian Constitution. It further considers the implications of these policies for Nigerian democracy and the democratization process.

## THE ETHNICIZATION AND RECONFIGURATION OF DEMOCRATIC PARAMETERS

Nigeria's democracy is a product of domestic and international pressures. From a domestic perspective, the inconclusive political transition, which terminated in 1993, was still an open sore that required treatment.<sup>(3)</sup> There was a groundswell of opposition from all segments of the Nigerian polity to the late General Sani Abacha and his regime. This necessitated the initiation of a transition program, which terminated suddenly upon the general's death in 1998. The end of the Cold War in 1989 brought democratization to the front burner of international agendas, leading to what has been referred to as the "third wave" of democratization (Huntington, 1991).

There is disagreement amongst scholars about the parameters of democracy and democratic governance, and especially about their universal applicability in the face of arbitrary classifications based on divergent ideological orientations. Democracy functions, ideally, on three platforms: as an ideological and aggregating tool;

as a system that creates participatory space for the people; and as an effective guarantee against tyranny and a mechanism that enthrones social justice within a polity (Howarth, 2001; Igwe, 2002; Nnoli, 2003; Babawale, 2007; Ejumudo, 2010). Embedded in the notion of democracy, therefore, are such empirical referents as competition, choice, mass participation, popular consultation, and an institutional platform for the articulation, sieving, and aggregation of ideological contestations. It is these empirical referents that made Igwe (2002: 110) describe democracy as: "One of the finest examples of a working human contrivance whose basic objective is to promote human life and society." The essence of democracy is the opening of a system to ensure widespread involvement of the citizenry in the political process; it is the people, and not the state, that drive democracy. The task of the state consists mainly of enabling the enthronement of democratic culture by setting up relevant institutional frameworks in accordance with the constitution, fashioning rules of engagement, and supervising adherence to them. Democracy, rather than being a system, is a process involving the popular will of the people to install and sustain government. But it is misleading to limit a democratic system to popular will without making reference to minority rights. The whole question of social justice involves the mainstreaming of minority rights within the political schema. The Economic Commission for Africa stated: "While majority rule may be the hallmark of liberal democracy, the protection of minority rights constitutes the major strength and resilience of any democratic system." (Economic Commission for Africa, 2009: 26)

The very idea of power rotation and zoning seems antithetical to the ideals of democratic culture. In 1999, when democratic governance was restored in Nigeria after a long period of military rule, there was a tacit consensus<sup>(4)</sup> among the political elite to limit electoral choices for the presidency to southern candidates (Agbaje, 2010). This resulted in the nominations of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo for the PDP and Chief Olu Falae for the coalition of All Peoples Party (now All Nigeria Peoples Party, ANPP), and Alliance for Democracy (AD) (Omotola, 2010).

This 1999 limitation of presidential nomination to southern candidates laid the foundation for ethnic democracy, a Nigerian variant of the extended threats to democratic culture. The larger picture included the universal monopolization of democracy by moneyed individuals, which resulted in depriving the masses of their democratic rights, and the enthronement of what Andreas Schedler has called "electoral authoritarianism" (Omotola, 2010: 537). Contrary to Ake's (1996: 6) argument, it was not the liberal democracy bequeathed to Nigeria that was responsible for the ethnic flavoring in its democracy, but the wholesale manipulation of primordial sentiments by the elite in furtherance of their interests.

The ethnicization of democracy was rationalized on the premise that democracy is a malleable social construct intended to fit into the peculiar circumstances of different nations. In Nigeria, ethnicization was used to bridge feelings of marginalization and social injustice, exemplified in the long political dominance of the North (Onwudiwe, 2004). But the ethnicization of democracy has had its own problems. It has created new tensions between ethnic groups about the proper interpretation of the presidential turn. It was this unresolved issue that underpinned political tensions in the run-up to the 2011 presidential election and the post-elec-

tion violence that erupted in the aftermath of President Goodluck Jonathan's electoral victory. Hundreds lost their lives in northern and central Nigeria in the ensuing violence (Amnesty International, 2012). Ahmed (2010) attributes the violence to the emergence of armed youth gangs who purported to protect the interests of their ethnic groups in the fallout of ethnic democracy. In effect, the inability to fine-tune power rotation arrangements not only increased tensions within the polity but also limited the range of choices available to the electorate. Both of these factors have far-reaching implications for Nigeria's democratization efforts.

## THE LEADERSHIP QUESTION IN NIGERIA

The leadership question in Nigeria revolves around the possibility of every indigenous ethnic group ascending to the presidency. Structural manoeuvrings over the years, such as the distortion of the federalist principles by successive military regimes, the conferment of superordinate powers on the federal government, its control of the country's enormous resources, and the ascendancy of a culture of parasitism, have contracted the federal space and made Northern Nigeria a hegemonic power centre. The exclusive dominance of the presidency by northerners since Nigeria's independence underpins ethno-national agitations that threaten the polity. Nigeria's leadership question is directly linked to the country's inability to satisfactorily resolve the contradictions of its statehood. As Achebe (1984: 1) has stated, "The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership."

The seemingly intractable leadership question in Nigeria is necessarily a carry-over from the colonial era. Emergent post-independence leaders deepened this problem when they assumed the role of retreating British colonialists. The nationalistic struggle, which pitted eastern and western regions against the colonial administration, created particularistic affinity between colonial Britain and the "docile" North. The British were able to achieve a transfer of power to the North by outright manipulation of the system in two important ways. First, they manipulated census figures to favor the North by ascribing numerical demographic superiority to it. British colonialists abrogated the principle of North-South parity in the allocation of seats in parliament and, in its stead, introduced a population-weighted principle that allocated 52% of the seats in parliament to the North (Osaghae, 1998; Mimiko, 2006). Second, they tactically delayed Nigerian independence so that necessary human capital could be put in place in the North before granting independence. Thus, since 1960, except for the interregna of January-July 1966; 1976-1979, and August-November 1993, the North had held on to power until 1999 (Oladeji, 2006; Babawale, 2007).

The Northern elite, who took over from retreating British colonialists, ruled both as military autocrats and democrats for forty out of Nigeria's fifty-three years as an independent state. In the process, they reinvented a skewed Nigerian federal structure that disaggregated and domiciled a large portion of regional power at the federal level. The outcome of this usurpation was the creation of an imperial

presidency that was all powerful when determining the socio-economic and political fate of the elite class (the federal government wields monopolistic and unbiddled control over Nigeria's wealth).<sup>(5)</sup>

It would seem simplistic and theoretically barren to anchor the leadership question solely within the realm of ethnicity. Such a mono-analytical typology would be inadequate for appreciating the pressures exerted on both the selection process, and the ascension to the Nigerian presidency. Within the configuration of the Nigerian state, even with distortions and tinkering to its federal system, it is impossible for any of the over 300 ethnic groups to ride roughshod over others to ascend to the presidency. The processes leading to the occupation of the presidency have always been manipulated within elite ranks. The incorporation of a clause of federal character in the 1999 Nigerian Constitution is intended to assuage and minimize the tensions that often accompany the sharing of state resources among the elite (Section 14 (3) & (4), Nigerian Constitution 1999).

Fears of marginalization, expressed by the minority ethnic elite in the pre-independence era, stemmed from the possibility of a majoritarian card being played to their detriment. Their demands consisted of creating separate regions for the western, eastern and northern minorities. The Willinks Commission, which addressed complaints, observed in their report that, "The minorities who have appeared before us have thought of separation as a remedy for their troubles. But unity might have the same effect, and though unity cannot be manufactured by a Commission, machinery can be devised which aims rather at holding the state together than at dividing it (Ojiako, 1981: 44)."

The Commission's proclivity for the maintenance of Nigerian unity clouded its sense of justice and led them to recommend a political solution that was not in accord with the wishes of the minorities. It recommended among others, the constitutional entrenchment of a Bill of Rights and the creation of Special and Minority Areas under the direction of boards to address the peculiar problems of the Niger Delta (Ojiako, 1981; Osaghae, 1998). The Willinks Commission and the British government, rather than address the fears of the minorities, which principally hinged on their right to assume the position of leadership in Nigeria, glossed over the issue, hoping that the emergence of national political parties after independence would help to allay such fears (Osaghae, 1998).

The immediate post-independence bourgeoisie attempted to allay the fears of minorities by tinkering with, and creating, the Midwest out of the Western region, and also attempted to carve minority regions out of the Eastern and Northern regions before a military coup d'état changed the political permutations. However, subsequent agitation by minority states was more a product of an elite strategy of realignment and inter-regional alliances for the capture of power than it was for justice.

The leadership crisis in Nigeria was intensified and sustained by politico-economic forces. Onimode (1983: 64) notes that, "After flag independence, political power was handed over to reactionary bureaucratic bourgeoisies who were more anxious to manipulate state power to strengthen their tenuous legitimacy and fragile economic base," than to address any national issue. The protection of the economic well-being of the elite became the *raison d'être* for leadership because

Nigerian leaders who took power had no secure source of material acquisition and, therefore, used political power for accumulation (Ake, 1981). Even those who had a “secure material base” soon discovered it was more lucrative to be in government than to chart an independent course in the murky waters of business. Thus, leadership in post-colonial Nigeria became a tool for elite economic aggrandizement as the state was transformed into a major source of rents through contracts, foreign exchange allocation, direct credit at below-market interest rates, tariff concessions, and a gamut of incentives (Ikpeze et al., 2004). The seeming ethnic agitation for zoning was merely an elite quest to create an opportunity for ascension to power, and not a manifestation of ethno-national patriotism.

## POLITICAL CRISES AND THE LOGIC OF POLITICAL RESTRUCTURING

Political crises in post-independent Nigeria are neither new phenomena nor isolated occurrences. They are an integral part, and defining characteristic, of the Nigerian political experience. The foundation for Nigeria’s political crises was laid by the 1914 amalgamation of southern and northern protectorates by Lord Lugard. Although, the amalgamation was convenient for the British, as it used the south’s enormous resources to augment northern deficits, it has remained the Achilles’ heel of Nigerian politics.

The history of political crises in Nigeria shows a trajectory from regional to national settings. The earliest political crises lit regional fires with only the smoke reaching the national arena. These crises were engendered by elite struggles for power. The participation of the federal government in such regional political crises was aimed at weakening the hold of dominant parties in these regions and paving the way for the entrance of rival parties. The African Continental Bank (ACB) saga of 1956 in the Eastern region, the Middle Belt uprising triggered by agitation for a separate region in the North, and the 1962 Awolowo/Akintola crisis that culminated in emergency rule in the West, exemplified Nigeria’s regionalization of political crises (Ojiako, 1981; Coleman, 1986; Minahan, 2002). The source of this regionalization of political crises, especially with respect to leadership, could be traced to three basic factors: first, the sweeping powers conferred on the regions by the 1951 Macpherson Constitution, which not only ignited regional political party structures but also harnessed and directed all energies to the regions; second, regional governments that were superior to the federal government; and third, the fact that regional governments had fiscal control of their regions and, thus, were stronger agents in the dispensation of patronage. These factors, and fear of being excluded in governance, led Awolowo to institute a pan-Yoruba group based on the theory of regional nationalism. As Coleman (1986: 350) has stated:

The dominant theory of the Action Group leaders was that under the circumstances then prevailing in Nigeria the only certain avenue to power was a regional political party.... Thus, during the three-year period 1948–1951, tribalism and regional nationalism became not only the most legitimate but



the most effective means for educated nationalists to secure power.

The military coup d'état initiated in 1966, changed the political landscape, imposing a military command structure over the administration of Nigeria, with the regions serving as outposts of the federal government. The balkanization of the regions, from 4 to 12 states, and eventually to the present 36-state structure, was not a response to agitation by minorities per se. Several overriding considerations underpinned the process. First, the regime had to deal with the issue of regime legitimacy in the face of the Biafra challenge; second, new fiefdoms had to be created to expand the dispensation of patronage; and third, the then military regime felt that balkanization tended to diminish the influence of dislodged politicians, thus paving the way for the strengthening of their own hold on power (Suberu, 1998).

Thus, instead of the states serving as component units in an ideal federal structure, they became mere appendages of the federal government. Another strategy used by the military was the collapse of the federal fiscal system, and the vestment of "absolute powers" in the federal government. This development led to an elite convergence at the centre, seeking access to state resources. The constitutional consolidation of the military definition of a strong center, and distorted fiscal structure, underpinned the de-regionalization of political crises and the present national character.

The creation of a strong center with unfettered access to Nigeria's fabulous oil wealth, and various uses to which the power of incumbency could and had been lent, stimulated and reconfigured elite interests. The bridging of political space in 1993 that led to a two-party structure, and the surprise victory of the late Chief M.K.O Abiola, exposed the artificiality of ethnicity and religion as tools of political aggregation. The unfortunate annulment of the election raised emotions that were not previously factors in Nigeria's restructured federal system. These emotions naturally led to the interpretation of the annulment as a manifestation of the North's perception of "presidential birthright" and intolerance toward other ethnic groups' aspirations to Nigerian leadership. The ethnic interpretation ascribed to the annulment not only eroded Gen Babangida's (1985–1993) hold on power but also threw up the logic of political restructuring in the form of zoning and rotation of power, something the north opposed in the 1994–1995 Constitutional Conference (Onwudiwe, 2004: 273).

The dominance of presidential power by the north and the annulment of the June 12 presidential election combined to place zoning, and rotation of the presidency among majority and minority ethnic groups, at the forefront of the Constitutional Conference convened by Gen. Sani Abacha (1993–1998) between 1994 and 1995. At the inauguration of the 380-member Conference, Gen. Abacha had advised the Conference to develop:

An inclusive system, which will guarantee a stable society through its sensitive accommodation of all shades of political opinion harnessed by full participation of all the component units of our land... (and) restraints on government as will ensure that no man will be oppressed and no group will



dominate or be marginalized. (Cited in Amuwo, 1998: 81)

The logic of zoning and rotation of power emerges from principles of equity, justice and fair-play that consider every ethnic group to be a bona fide constituent of the Nigerian federation. Amuwo (1998: 80) perceptively elaborates on this logic:

There are at least two mutually exclusive “logics” of political restructuring and constitutionalism: formal or premeditated logic and informal or pre-emptive logic. The first relates to a genuine attempt, at a crisis point in the life of a nation, by leaders thrown up by the crisis to resolve them, *mutatis mutandis*, to the satisfaction of the mass-majority. The second works in the opposite direction by a deliberate undermining of the formal restructuring process in order that extra-or non-national interests may find full expression.

These two logical approaches characterized the Constitutional Conference of 1994–1995. The mood of the country then shifted towards forging a new national consensus anchored to an inclusive system devoid of marginalization or oppression. The North (which had held onto power for 31 of then Nigeria’s 34 years of statehood) was opposed to the proposal to incorporate the principle of rotational presidency into the Nigerian constitution (Nwala, 1997; Onwudiwe, 2004). Therefore, the non-inclusion of the principle of rotational presidency in the eventual 1999 Nigerian Constitution by the regime of Gen. Abdusalami Abubakar (1998–1999) was in keeping with the hegemonic wishes of the Northern oligarchs. It provided the political latitude for national dominance. Despite constitutional non-inclusion, there appeared to be an implied agreement amongst the elite to incorporate rotation into the political dispensation that took effect in 1999. This was demonstrated through sponsorship by all political parties of two Yoruba candidates in the 1999 presidential election.

## CONTEXTUALIZING ZONING AND ROTATION OF POWER IN THE NIGERIAN BODY POLITIC

By virtue of their long occupation of the seat of power (both in military and democratic regimes), the Northern elite developed an affinity for state power and thus perceived it as their birthright. This perception informed the claim by Usman Bugaje that proponents of the Sovereign National Conference hated the North and were plotting the collapse of the country (Cited in Amuwo, 1998: 84). To the Northern elite, the Obasanjo presidency was a “loan” to the South to compensate and assuage anxieties that emerged over the June 12 electoral debacle. In other words, the “ceding” of power to the South-West was a force majeure that had to be accommodated and endured while it lasted. This was evident in the eight-year regime of President Obasanjo (1999–2007) with the provocative promulgation of sharia laws, religious riots and threats of impeachment, all of which created tension in the body politic.

The 1994–1995 Constitutional Conference clearly demonstrated an understanding of Nigeria’s political problems when it consensually resolved that the presidency should rotate between the North and South, which was dutifully included in Section 229 (1–5) of its draft constitution (Nwala, 1997; Agbaje, 1998). Yet the 1999 constitution, which was supposedly a product of that Conference, did not contain these provisions. Nevertheless, the spirit of power rotation guided the post-military transition that produced the Obasanjo presidency in 1999.

Until recently, zoning and rotation of presidential power have not been deliberate national policies, or political party policy. Earlier attempts at democracy (1960–1966 and 1979–1983) did not consciously include zoning or rotation of presidential power because of the ethnic composition or flavor of the parties. The major preoccupation of these ethnically-entrenched political parties was to gather constitutionally required percentages to enable the formation of government. In other words, it was considered a given by the Northern elite that the majority must always have its way. Because the military (which had ruled both consecutively and intermittently) manipulated the state patronage system in favor of the North, its elite had greater resources with which to execute their political agenda. Only Chief M.K.O Abiola, owing to his unfettered access to state patronage, was able to contest and win the 1993 presidential election.

The impetus for zoning and rotation of power was ostensibly derived from efforts to create a sense of belonging amongst ethno-national elite groups in the face of the inadequacies of federal character principles. Aper Aku argued that, “Zoning can rescue minorities from political obscurity and at the same time guarantee majority interests, foster national stability and ensure the success [of democracy] (Onwudiwe, 2004: 273).”

Arguments about zoning and rotation are suffused with conceptual confusion. Zoning and rotation tend to be confused with federal character principles enshrined in the 1999 constitution. Nwala and Ogbonna (2010) fell into this trap when they argued that the principles of zoning and rotation were implicit in Section 14 (3) of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, which addresses the federal character principle. This was misleading. The principles of zoning and rotation, and those of the federal character, are entirely different, and relate to different scenarios. While the principles of zoning and rotation are anchored on the delineation of Nigeria into six geopolitical zones for manageability, the principle of federal character references the thirty-six states of the country and Abuja, and is concerned with representation in National Government (Section 14 (3), First & Second Schedule, Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigerian, 1999).

It is necessary at this point to clarify the concepts of zoning and rotation. These concepts are mutually reinforcing. There cannot be rotation unless the issue of zoning is resolved. Constitutionally, zones do not properly exist in the Nigerian polity. Such categorizations as North, South, and other geopolitical zones are fluid and arbitrary terms used in political discourse and are designed merely to serve as guides to confer meaning and boundary. Because there is no constitutional basis for a zone structure, there cannot be, constitutionally speaking, zoning.

The absence of an authoritative constitutional beacon as a guide for what constitutes Nigerian political zones does not invalidate their usefulness as essential

categories. It only makes it impossible, indeed unproductive, to sustain an argument about the trajectory and rotation of power. The only official document that makes any reference to zones and zoning outside Abacha's summarization of the outcome of the 1994–1995 Constitutional Conference, presented in his 1995 Independence Day national broadcast, is the PDP constitution (Nwala, 1997: 201–203). The PDP constitution provides that: “In pursuance of the principle of zoning, justice and fairness, the party shall adhere to the policy of rotation and zoning of party and public elective offices and it shall be enforced by the appropriate executive committee at all levels.” (Section 7 (2), Constitution of the Peoples Democratic Party, 1998)

Since their inception, the structures of the PDP and other political parties have reflected and borne the imprimatur of six geopolitical zones. The major organs and structures of the PDP and other major political parties are not patterned after Northern or Southern zones, but six geopolitical zones, each having its own congress, executive and working committees (Nwala & Ogbonna, 2010). The PDP categorization of zones consists of North-Central, North-East, North-West, South-East, South-South, and South-West, and from these we can distil definitional criteria for zoning. The boundaries set by the contemporary wave of debates on the subject are inadequate. The basis for current debates on zone, zoning, and rotation of power is purely political and does not include other holistic determining variables.

The most important determining variable in national aggregation is ethnicity. Because of the permeation of ethnicity into every sector and stratum of social and political discourse, it has become the primary basis for the distribution of state wealth. For this reason, such categories as gender (men–women), age (youth–old men–women) and class (elite–masses) that constitute distinct zones, are subsumed under ethnicity, because any man, woman, youth, elite personage, or commoner would be asked their ethnic affiliation. Still, any definitional postulation that glosses over socio-cultural and economic factors for zoning and rotation would most certainly be considered analytically weak and unhelpful. It is therefore not adequate to conceptualize zoning merely as the alternation of key national political offices (the offices of the President, Senate President and Speaker of the House of Representatives) amongst the six geopolitical zones (Ezeife, 2010). Zoning and rotation of power are two mutually reinforcing concepts that connote recognizable delimitation, distribution, and alternation of key national political offices in such a way that key cleavages in the political system such as gender, age grouping, and socio-economic status subsumed within the ambit of ethnicity are properly categorized, streamlined, and positioned either clockwise or anti-clockwise as the basis for power alternation within the polity.

The PDP constitution not only recognized the imperative of zoning and rotation as irreducible requirements for engendering feelings of inclusiveness and belonging, it also implied an order of rotation in 1999. Therefore, contrary to arguments that there was no order or sequence of rotation (Nwala & Ogbonna, 2010), there was indeed an inferable order evident within the restrictions imposed by the PDP in 1999: it closed its doors to Northern presidential aspirants and only considered presidential aspirants from the South-East, South-South and South-West. The late

Alhaji Abubakar Rimi, a North-Easterner, who defied the zoning and rotation principle to purchase the presidential nomination form, was refunded his nomination fee and was forbidden from contesting (Ezeife, 2010). This indicates that the PDP operated its zoning and rotation principle not as a *tabula rasa*, but as recognizing the realities of northern domination of the presidency since 1960.

## THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE ON ZONING AND ROTATION: WHOSE POWER, WHOSE TURN TO WIELD IT?

There is a wealth of arguments and counter-arguments about zoning and rotation of power relating especially to questions of whether they, in fact, exist, how they came into existence, the nature of zone structures, and the modalities for operationalizing them. Most arguments lack dispassionate objectivity, as they are steeped in an antagonistic mindset of “us” versus “them.” As we have already noted, zoning and rotational principles have not, until recently, been a part of Nigeria’s political experience. They are concepts of circumstance that were consciously introduced into Nigeria’s political lexicon after the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election. As Ezeife (2010) asserts, Abiola did not benefit from any zoning arrangement but, rather, contested as a Nigerian and won on account of his tremendous national profile.

The forum in which zoning and rotation of power was first introduced, and won adherents, was the Constitutional Conference of 1994–1995. The Conference reached agreement on two volatile issues: it accepted zoning and rotation of power, and also demarcated the country into six geopolitical zones. It is important to recollect the positions of northern and southern delegates in that conference: while most southern delegates endorsed the demarcation of the country into six geopolitical zones and rotation of power amongst them, northern counterparts moved from total rejection of the idea of rotation to reluctant acceptance, subject to the basis of North and South zones (Agbaje, 1998: 127).

Zoning and rotation of power received official endorsement from Gen. Abacha in his Independence Day broadcast on 1 October, 1995. His pronouncement granted official recognition to power-sharing. The fact that Abacha did not include them in a decree did not detract from their official recognition. Indeed, the basis for the current debate about zoning and rotation has stemmed from the official status it acquired during the Abacha regime. Not only did Gen Abacha recognize the demarcation of Nigeria into six geopolitical zones corresponding to the present geopolitical framework adopted by the PDP, he also recognized that power rotation would occur amongst these zones, and not just between North and South (Olaitan, 1998: 127). The idea of zoning and power rotation was not restricted to the office of the President, but also extended to the offices of Vice-President, Senate President, and Speaker of the House of Representatives. Gen Abacha asserted that these principles, “Shall be entrenched in the constitution and shall be at the federal level and applicable for an experimental period of 30 (thirty) years.” (Olaitan, 1998: 127)

Following the death of Abacha in 1998, and the ascension of Gen Abdulsalami

Abubakar as the Head of State, the resultant constitution omitted the provisions on zoning and rotation of power. It is instructive to note that the choice and adoption of Chief Olu Falae and Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo (retd.) were not done just to appease the NADECO (National Democratic Coalition), “June Twelvers”<sup>(6)</sup> and the South-West as generally believed, but also to allow the implementation of zoning and rotation as already advanced by Gen. Abacha and accepted by the political elite. In other words, the Obasanjo presidency represented the first serious attempt to institutionalize zoning and rotation of presidential power in Nigeria.

The present debate on zoning and rotation is a reflection of the failure of the political elite. The Nigerian political elite misused the opportunity offered to them by the 2005 National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) to settle several corrupted areas in the country’s body politic, especially power sharing, resource control, and true federalism. The Chairman of the Power Sharing Committee of the NPRC, Dr. Chukwuemeka Ezeife, asserted that his committee had recommended that the presidency should rotate among the six geopolitical zones “such that no one zone should have a second chance to produce the president when there is a zone which has not produced the president once” (Ezeife, 2010: 2). The sudden and unceremonious manner that characterized the end of the NPRC (as a result of resource control controversy) provided the Obasanjo government with the excuse needed to suppress these recommendations and promote its hidden agenda for a third term in office (through the implementation of an unconstitutional tenure elongation scheme).

Various interpretations of zoning and rotation (based on geopolitical zones and North/South distinctions) led to presidential aspirations from all the geopolitical zones in 2007 except the South-West. The choice of the North-West by the PDP and Obasanjo, which coincided with similar choices by major political parties such as the ANPP and Action Congress (AC) (now Action Congress of Nigeria, ACN), resulted in the election of the late President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua (2007–2010). Unfortunately President Yar’Adua died in office before the completion of his term of office, paving the way for the controversy that put the entrenchment of zoning and rotation to the test.

The zoning and rotation controversy started with unnecessary bottlenecks created by political elites who claimed loyalty to President Yar’Adua (in contradiction to the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria) when the long period of his indisposition and absence required a *de facto* Acting President. There was serious opposition to conferring this constitutional right on then Vice-President Goodluck Jonathan. The Northern elite wanted an extra-constitutional measure that would ensure that another North-Westerner emerged as a replacement to the late President Yar’Adua. This mindset informed the reluctance and opposition to ratifying the Vice-President as acting President as stipulated by the Nigerian Constitution. Eventually, thoughts of “political contraptionism” gave way to constitutionalism and Dr. Goodluck Jonathan assumed the role of Acting President and, following the death of President Yar’Adua in 2010, that of President.

Constitutionally, President Jonathan merely fulfilled the law in completing Yar’Adua’s term of office. In the run-up to the 2011 presidential election, arguments moved from Jonathan’s eligibility to complete Yar’Adua’s term, to contest-

ing the office based on zoning. The core of the zoning argument was that if President Jonathan ran, he would be breaking the “gentleman’s agreement” on zoning and rotation of power. This argument employed an eclectic logic that hinged on constitutionalism, morality and integrity.

The only institutional documents that could be referred to for insight as to President Jonathan’s eligibility were the 1999 Nigerian Constitution and the PDP constitution. The Nigerian Constitution guarantees every Nigerian the right to vie for any elective office, subject to meeting the stipulated conditions for that office. The PDP Constitution also recognizes this right, as well as the principles of zoning and rotation of power in the exercise of that right. The PDP constitution neither envisaged nor provided a leeway for a possible force majeure, and this formed the basis for the controversy about the presidential aspirations of President Goodluck Jonathan in 2011. However, the original intention of incorporating zoning and rotation into the PDP constitution was to give all six geopolitical zones of the country a chance to assume the presidency. A representative from every zone was expected to enjoy a four-year term in the presidency after which the race would be thrown open (Alli, 2010).

Even though former President Obasanjo did not keep to the four-year term outlined in the PDP convention on zoning and rotation of power, this recalcitrance did not invalidate the position of the party on a four-year term for each of the zones. In fact Obasanjo’s second tenure was given to him at the discretion of the Expanded National Caucus of the PDP (Alli, 2010).

The Nigerian Constitution only guarantees a four-year term to the President (Section 135 (2), Nigerian Constitution, 1999). A second term is not automatic, and the President must receive a fresh mandate through re-election. Thus, a second term is only available to an incumbent. It was illogical for the North-West, or any zone that did not have incumbency, to insist on or argue for the exclusion of President Jonathan, or any candidate from the South, from the 2011 presidential election.

If we follow the intended meaning and purpose of zoning and rotation of power, as adopted by the Nigerian political elite, there needed not be any controversy about the presidential aspirations of Goodluck Jonathan. Indeed his presidential aspirations fell within the ambit of the real meaning of zoning and rotation. The North-West had taken its turn with the presidency of the late President Yar’Adua. Whether by North/South categorization or geopolitical zone structure, President Jonathan’s ambitions did not imperil these principles; rather, they reinforced the concepts of zoning and rotation.

The 2011 presidential election provided the basis for testing various interpretations of zoning and power rotation. While the PDP fielded Goodluck Jonathan as its presidential candidate, who had earlier defeated Alhaji Atiku Abubakar in the party’s primaries, other political parties fielded candidates from across the geopolitical zones. The frontline political parties then, especially the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) and the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), presented General Muhammadu Buhari and Mr. Nuhu Ribadu, respectively, as their candidates. Both candidates are from the North-West zone.

The political strategy of the CPC and ACN was to take advantage of the seem-



ing discontent in Northern Nigeria, stemming from disagreements about zoning and power rotation, to gain electoral leverage. The PDP and Goodluck Jonathan won the April 21, 2011 presidential election, but this popular mandate of the President did not assuage disagreements about zoning. Rather it ignited violence across the Northern states of Nigeria, leading to the unfortunate deaths of over 800 people (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Some have suggested that the insecurity across Nigeria since 2011, especially terrorist activities orchestrated by the Boko Haram sect<sup>(7)</sup>, are rooted in feelings of marginalization<sup>(8)</sup> on the part of Northerners (Anya, 2012). But no conclusive evidence exists to validate this view.

A recent unification of opposition parties, namely the ACN, CPC, All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP), a section of All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), and others, to form the All Progressive Congress (APC), may provide the platform to wrestle power from the PDP in the 2015 general election. The question of zoning and power rotation may be the most serious problem for the unified party as President Jonathan is likely to contest for a second term.

## CONCLUSION

There is either a basic misunderstanding, or deliberate distortion, of the true meaning of zoning and rotation of power within the Nigerian polity. It is this basic misunderstanding that led Udentia to assert:

The fundamental barometer that will measure the political temperature of the nation remains President Jonathan's decision regarding his political future. If he decides to honour his party's zoning arrangement through an unequivocal declaration that his mandate ends in 2011, not to be renewed again in the next election cycle, he will open enormous governance space and shut down the dominant space politics now occupies in the polity. But if he remains undecided, for the moment, about his true presidential ambition or even states clearly that he will contest the 2011 presidential election on the platform of his party, the PDP, he will shut down the governance space and widen the space [that] bitter, acrimonious politics will occupy (Udentia, 2010: 6).

President Jonathan's 2011 presidential pursuits could not have imperilled zoning and rotation of power. The 1999 Nigerian Constitution guarantees only one four-year term, with an additional four-year term available to an incumbent upon re-election. Since President Jonathan successfully completed Yar'Adua's term of office, the North-West could be deemed to have legitimately completed its term. With that completion, the presidency was then available for contest by other geopolitical zones. The zoning and rotation controversy was only a manifestation of desperation by certain interested political elites in the twilight of their political careers, and of fear that when the cycle revolves to their zones again, they will be irredeemably past their prime. As is customary with the Nigerian elite, they have hidden under the canopy of ethnicity and regional marginalization to mask and advance their interests.



## NOTES

- (1) Owing to the age bracket of most of these politicians, the devolution of presidential powers outside their geopolitical zones means the foreclosure of their presidential ambition. This is so because by the time power revolves back to their section of the country, they would be too old to contest for the presidency.
- (2) The six geopolitical zones are: North-Central comprising Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau states; North-East comprising Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba and Yobe States; North-West comprising Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara States; South-East comprising Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States; South-South comprising Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers State; and South-West comprising Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo States.
- (3) Late Chief Moshood Abiola was presumed to have won the presidential election held on 12 June, 1993 but the military junta of General Ibrahim Babangida (retd.) annulled the election, thus throwing the country into political chaos.
- (4) The consensus that led to the emergence of two Yoruba candidates as the nominees from the two political parties that contested the 1999 presidential election (the PDP and AD/APP alliance) was not a product of any formal agreement among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. The consensus was surreptitiously engineered by the then-military oligarchs, in alliance with their political counterparts, to compensate the Yoruba nation for the annulled 12 June, 1993 presidential election presumed to have been won by M.K.O Abiola, a Yoruba man. In actuality, consensus was inferred based on the fact that the only Northerner (Abubakar Rimi) who purchased the presidential nomination form of the PDP was refunded the money he paid, and barred from running on the party's platform.
- (5) Elite is a generic term used exclusively for the privileged segment of Nigerian society. Membership into this segment is determined by status, defined in terms of position, and the extent of resources and power wielded by an individual. It encompasses the top-ranking individuals and groups who are distinguished by their privileged status. The categorization of elite spans bureaucratic, political, intellectual, religious, and military segments of the society. In Nigeria there is no rigidity in elite configuration, as there is a robust circulation of elite, often based on alliances. The rentier system operating in Nigeria creates the necessary collaborative platform for achieving the acquisition of state power for continued political domination.
- (6) "June Twelvets" is a term used to depict individuals and groups who agitated for the revalidation of the 12 June, 1993 presidential election, which was presumed to have been won by the late M.K.O Abiola but was annulled by the military government of Ibrahim Babangida (1985–1993).
- (7) The Boko Haram sect is a terrorist group in Nigeria which has, since 2009, adopted suicide bombing, targeted assassination, and deployment of bombs against the State and its people to create a sense of insecurity in the polity. Boko Haram, literally means "western education is a sin." The group does not have a cohesive demand list; its cardinal quest is the advancement of Islam in Nigeria. Although there are no concrete landmarks to conclusively attribute political motives to the Boko Haram terrorist activities, the confession by President Goodluck Jonathan that many members of his cabinet, as well as law enforcement agencies, are sympathizers of Boko Haram could be regarded as implying that Boko Haram hides behind religious proclamations to pursue political objectives.
- (8) Marginalization refers to the interpretation by certain Northern politicians that, after the death of Umaru Yar'Adua in 2010, Nigeria's presidency should have continued to be occupied by a Northerner. The pattern of violence in northern Nigeria suggests that not all

violent movements emanated from feelings of marginalization. For instance, the Sharia riots that erupted across Northern Nigeria in the early 2000s had nothing to do with marginalization.

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